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UNIVERSITY  
BELFAST**

## Charles Dickens on Tour: The Belfast Public Readings

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# Belfast in Dickens's Day

In the 1850s and 1860s Belfast was a growing, thriving, prosperous city. Dickens was guaranteed large audiences, who would readily pay for the privilege of hearing him read.

In these two decades the city's population expanded from 87,000 to 175,000. It was Ireland's pre-eminent industrial centre, featuring rope-making, heavy engineering, shipbuilding, and, most importantly, the power-loom weaving of linen.

Prosperity brought with it an increased demand for urban facilities for those with leisure time. People sought diversion in concert halls, theatres, public houses, and the spectacular pleasure grounds on Queen's Island, which attracted huge crowds.

The expanding railways and shipping routes allowed people and goods to travel further than ever before. By 1855 there was a train link to Dublin, allowing visitors like Dickens to journey between Ireland's two premier cities with relative ease.

Urban growth did, however, produce problems, including inferior living conditions for the working classes (who mostly settled near the linen mills and factories), and a lack of proper drainage and sanitation. By the 1850s 25,000 people had no privies.



Anonymous stereograph of the Crystal Palace on Queen's Island.  
Photograph © Public Record Office of Northern Ireland.

Queen's Island was created when the Belfast Harbour Commissioners agreed to cutting the Victoria Channel, in order to ease access from the sea to Belfast's docks. It was here, on reclaimed land, that a Crystal Palace was built in 1851, together with an amusement arcade and a menagerie, as the People's Pleasure Park. The fountain in the centre of this photo depicts Neptune, sitting on a shell, drawn by seahorses. Today the site is occupied by the Titanic Belfast Signature Project.

The Great Northern Railway Station, built to a design by John Goodwin in 1846-8, was the terminus of the Ulster Railway, which first linked Belfast to Lisburn in 1839. After passage of the 1847 Railway Act, the network expanded rapidly, to link Belfast with Ballymena and Holywood (1848), with Coleraine and Dublin (1855), and with Derry/Londonderry (1860). It was here that Dickens arrived, from Dublin, for each of his three visits.



Ulster Bank, Belfast, photographed by Robert French (1841-1917).  
Photograph © Public Record Office of Northern Ireland

The increase in the number of banks was an indication of Belfast's prosperity in the 1800s. The Ulster Bank was founded in 1836, and in 1857-60 erected a magnificent building on Waring Street. Designed by Glasgow architect James Hamilton, it had an Italianate façade, with a central dome, and a richly ornamented interior, including groups of figures depicting Science, Poetry, Sculpture, and Music.



Derelict houses, 1912, photographed by Alexander Robert Hogg (1870-1939).  
Photograph © National Museums Northern Ireland

Like other Victorian cities, Belfast had significant difficulties dealing with overcrowding and sanitation. This derelict enclosed court in the Millfield area was a notorious slum, with a privy at the far end as the only form of sanitation for all the residents. It was cleared in 1912.

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Anonymous photograph of the Ulster Railway terminus, Great Victoria Street.  
Photograph © National Museum Northern Ireland